poems

afterpastures

claire hero

winner 2007 caketrain chapbook competition

afterpastures

final judge claudia rankine

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CAKETRAIN
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Box 82588, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15218
www.caketrain.org
caketrainjournal@hotmail.com

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My dear what is meat.

—Gertrude Stein

Animals never talk back.

—Harriet Ritvo

More than half the world are human beings in sheep's clothing.

—Whitwell Elwin

:11 MOLT
:12 [PENNED INSIDE]
:13 [IN AFTERPASTURES]
:14 [CITY WITH THE BONE STILL ATTACHED]
:15 [MAMMALED, TEAT-]
:16 [CRACKBONE carries the lamb]
:17 —like a furbeast
:18 [REDNESS in the grass]
:19 [THIS FLESH, LOAMY]
:20 [THE NIGHT WAS ANIMAL]
:21 STAG
:23 —he drums while you dance
:24 [OVER THE CONTROL TOWER]
:25 [FROM HUNTRESS]
:26 CRACKBONE:
:28 [BROOD-NURSERY BRED]
:29 [BESWAMPED, the heart]
:30 [DOMESTICITY, UNFORESTING FIEND,]
:32 [THE KING FOREST]
:33 [I AM MADE of many doors]
:34 [SEA-SWALLOWED, severed]
:35 [THROUGH THE EYE]
:36 —the half-life, the soon-
:37 [OUT OF THE AFTERPASTURES]
:40 Notes and Acknowledgements

:11 MOLT

First, there's a hatching
in the crawlspace, the kindling

of hair. Something getting out
of hand. Then, riots in corners.

Water-scrawled walls. She's aware
of the changes, the ringing

round her eyes, fur around her mouth.
Unbecomingly a foxing. A murk

at the center. Something
is eating at her. Located in the velvet.

Dressed out like an animal,
she thistles & fickles. She fawns

in a murmur of milk. Grows feral.
Febrile. Soft as the inside of teeth.

PENNED INSIDE the wondervault
I did not know my place
until I had been blooded
by the Great Chain

Now: Cut the mouthpiece
from the
decomposing links,

watch new morphemes
hatch
in the wounds

& eat them
clean

:13 IN AFTERPASTURES
where the white meat lives

where the moon gnaws off its daytrapped limb
& limps across the nightsky

Crackbone rides

(Chicago
once a jungle –

now: the dark stall. now: who-will-feed-you.)

His campfire is the only bright spot

Animals he takes apart
like toys—heart & liver,
breast & rib & chop

He knows what the meat wants

& he, his belt full of knives, bids us come

:14 CITY WITH THE BONE STILL ATTACHED:
this
is our nature:

ligament-stripped
-scrapped
heap of fat

Out of the cavity
of hair & rib
out of the swamp
of filchblood

Something rises

eyestalk:
:skyscraper

. . . . . .

Come, Salvage,
steal inside
this brain
cave

MAMMALED, TEAT-tethered
to hunger, to heat beating
its bloodnoise
through cellwalls
of tomorrow's marrow,

we farrow, feral-
lettered, a future:

thin thing, re-
vealed,
all knee & milkteeth

Milkcent
Milkcentury

:16 CRACKBONE carries the lamb
The lamb
bleats himself into silence

effluvia in the throat-hold, earthwarm—

Sheep cleaved
from the mountainside

Spore of sheep, wind-bred,
spread, springing up

in clutch & tussock, fun-
gal, many-footed, blight of teeth

Sheep at the sea edge, reef
of driftbone, saltwhite

the amniotic scree
out of which I walked
on the grey rock on the red rock

—Shepherd my tongue into the pen
Crackbone carries lamb.

:17

—like a furbeast
in a trap, the tongue
ensnared
by its bloodlust

(I'll catch you
by the skin
of your teeth—

REDNESS in the grass:
calf & leaf—

You walk out of the trees, hiding your hands.

Everywhere the mouths
bloodglottal, stanched.

Everywhere the meatseed
pulses toward harvest.

:19 THIS FLESH, LOAMY breeding ground
begets Multitudes, bodies
sprouting from eyesand & bonemeal:

the needish & the nichebreachers,
geneshepherds, genescavengers;
the was & the stillborn

squat in the fossa,
gorging on spermsalt & eggclay,
gorging & rooting

exuberantly,
mutinously, their blighted heads
lumpish with seed—

. . . . . .

Zooidal upstarts
low & unruly
They recognize no boundary

—I uproot the geneweed,
another sprouts, spreads,
I uproot the geneweed—

:20 THE NIGHT WAS ANIMAL, was owlmaw
& preyclaw. Half-wild, I shrank
from its grasping, the moon scything
through fir limbs. Half-tame, I
heard the scuttle of blood—

Crackbone, I
followed your footsteps.

I followed your footsteps, I opened the night-box,
I scalped the meatbeasts, I bewildered my body
with hair & claw –
humping the sacrifice
through the chambers of night

& still the forest continues, the linespeed
never slows. I am up to my ankles,
hand cramping on the knife,—

Where is death?
Where does death enter our lives?

Death is a house inside the forest.
Come. I am made of many doors.

What doesn't fear my hands? The crush of my thumb, my fingers that make a fence. The deer stand on one side, watching. Among the trees they are hard to see, their skins smell of leafmould. If they would let me, I would trace the grain of their pelts, its marks like a secret language. I would put my hands upon them, and their eyes would roll white.

—And then we are in a green room, the stag and I, his brown eye turns like a globe, leaves fall around us.

The leaves, then the trees.

The trees fall around us. We watch them through the window. The trees fall, and then the deer fall. I want to speak, to stop this, but my voice box, I see, is in the palm of my hand, closed as a seed. First the antlers fall, then the hides dry up and blow away and the bones erode until they are only eddies of sand. The stag closes his eye.

Out of the wreckage, deer-shapes of light rise and walk toward us. They walk through the window, they walk through the wall, they walk through every fence I make between us.

. . . . . .

. . . the antlers are heavy.
They drip blood into my eyes.
They bow my neck until I am doubled,
until I am savage, & forest, & endless.

:23

—he drums while you dance
with your pelts on
skin savaged with woad & want

(be careful with those antlers!
you'll bring down the forest with such forks—

bladderballoons, caught
in some ill wind—

seeds rising on the updraft—

My hands
have been lost to me

Under my feet
worms writhe & grubs gnaw

leaf to vein, bone to pebble—.

.

From the throbbing ground,
fertile slurry of vision
& excess—

from the animal smelted down
into its animals—

forge geneneedles,
sew the meat
to the fancy.

:25

FROM HUNTRESS to heifer, Crackbone,
I have changed. I've become
what you spurn: some tame
meat, a teat. Stranded I am

inside her helix, her gene a door
I slipped through, her flank
a window onto another—.
I make of her a home.

& what will you do—drive me
off, gadfly?
What next will I become?

This white sustenance –
Change – I offer you,
fruit of my dug & clover.

IT MEATED IN HIM. It devilled
in the very egg. Bloodsmoked, he roams.

A murder of flies. Grubs in the hide.
The entrails of the West stink

in his tracks. There are cow-boys,
& cowboys. Where once his lullaby

would put a herd to sleep, now –
horns break off, legs crumple like matches.

He can tear them off with his eyeteeth.
Can carve a brute Creature

out of grass, a Country out of chop, & clot.
He bears his Master's brand. When he rides

for this circus of hoof & butchery, saddled
with mouths & a chemical lasso, he expects

the cheering pastures, but not the night,
when the hunger crawls out of the city

& sucks the beef from off his bone,
then cries over the 'poor Beast.' *Swete dogie*,

he says, *the keping of cowes is of it self*
a verie idle lyfe & a fitt nursurie for a theif.

BROOD-NURSERY BRED, you,
albumen-clad, stand
candled &
declared: unviable:

the oosphere inside,
the also-sun, un-
seen. Un-
harvested.

Dark hatchling,
egglice
in your hair,

I wash you clean
—another hatches—,
I wash you clean.

:29

BESWAMPED, the heart
—in darkness, leaf by leaf—
blanches, a lantern
to light this bonethicket
& the little path of crumbs
away, away, –

:30 DOMESTICITY, UNFORESTING FIEND, you make us
naught but fire. Nothing lives in us

but hunger. An empire of grass.

With soot & root it drags the beast to the four corners.
Drags us by our tongues into dark places.

We stump & come thresher. We shanty & shoot
out, from the stockyard, as bluegrass
& rye. As rust & leaf smut.

Our mouths lignified, ignited.

(But under our aprons, those forests!
We hide them, one by one, as eggs
in the grass. I sprout

a mooncalf, & sling it in a tree.
Evergreen, my little nutlet, my pollen polyp.

Sweetly she grows seedy. Greenly.
Her head open, empty, as a hornet's nest.
We slip acorns under the papery leaves, & soon,

a trickle of sap & the creaky limbs.
Soon, the woodsy rag between her legs.
A womb full of saplings, slender as wicks –

.

There never was a wilderness without.
We muzzle her in apron & wildfire.
Wean her on sawdust & chaff.

THE KING FOREST, it is a toy, & death
a house inside it. All door.
We yean

in spring, & then,
shank-sunk, by the plaits on our skulls,
we haul the house through winter's woodbin:

Who dwells here?
Who beds down
among such burls?

We knot & unknot the barky wool.
In the wings, a gaggle of women
knit up our chokes
out of our hair pulp.

:33 I AM MADE of many doors:

—water
falling through water

—white arrows
on painted lichen

—tracks in snow –
pine marten? squirrel?

little snow hands

(Can I say they are
"like" my hands?
" "my" hands
"

. . . . . .

: Skeins of wool
fall through my fingers
I knit a sheep house, I knit
a sheep house for my body

beautiful body

entered, entering

SEA-SWALLOWED, severed
from the ankle, the feet
swim free,
tide-drawn
deeper, farther –

flattening,
scuffling under
the sand, skin
finning,
& slow-
ly, slowly,
the floundereye
traveling up
from the sole

(How far will I go without feet?
((– we, we –

Watch, little fish,
the sun eclipsed
by my moonskull –

THROUGH THE EYE
cavities the sky

is a bruise, is
primed & in-

divisible, blue
print of orbit

Anything framed
becomes a

percentage
of beauty, slight

holes puncturing
the muscle

of distance—
Sling it far

—the half-life, the soon-
to-be-encreatured future
huddles in clutches,
chipping away
its cell wall
with the eggtooth

(& then—what?
wildlife?
wilder?
wilden—

OUT OF THE AFTERPASTURES
this algaeic realm—
scumfed, spawnclouded—spawns

in thickwater, quickfinned
in the virid stir
of pondscape, plantsphere,

the Changing, the half-
made, the more-fitted-for, the hy-

brid, by-
product
bride

. . . . . .

In "[FROM HUNTRESS]", the lines "This white sustenance – /Change" are a variation on Emily Dickinson's "that White Sustenance—/ Despair—" from ("I cannot live with You—")

In "CRACKBONE:" the last two lines are a quote from Edmund Spenser in Virginia DeJohn Anderson's *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America* [Oxford, 2004].

In "[DOMESTICITY, FORESTING FIEND,]" the phrase "those forests!" comes from Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, in which the character Hamm declares, "What dreams! Those forests!"

My gratitude goes out to the editors of the following journals, in which some of these poems were first published:

CAB/NET: "[I AM MADE of many doors]"
Coconut: "MOLT"
CROWD: "[THROUGH THE EYE]" (as "On a White Skull, Found")
DIAGRAM: "STAG," "[THE NIGHT WAS ANIMAL]"
Foursquare: "[BROOD-NURSERY BRED]"
horse less review: "[CRACKBONE carries the lamb]," "[OUT OF THE AFTERPASTURES]," "[REDNESS in the grass]"
Octopus: "[FROM HUNTRESS]," "[MAMMALED, TEAT-]"

Thanks to the University of Canterbury, to Kate James for the use of her fabulous photograph, and especially to my family and friends for their support. This book is for Jed, who opens my eyes.

Claire Hero received her MFA from Washington University in St. Louis. Her poems have appeared in several journals, including *Boston Review*, *How2*, *Crowd*, *Pleiades*, *A Public Space* and *Octopus. A*nother chapbook, *Cabinet*, is forthcoming in 2008 from Dancing Girl Press. The poems in *afterpastures* were written while she was living in New Zealand.

Melbourne artist **Kate James** draws from a variety of art practices to produce hand-crafted objects, photographs and video. Examining the often overlooked occurrence of anxiety amongst domesticated animals, her work aims to highlight the shared experience of anxiety between humans and animals. Employing materials such as horse hair, dog hair and wool, she draws animals and humans together, both literally and figuratively.

poetry $8 US

"Claire Hero conjures language in such a way that description creates possibility. In this world, where Darwin and Dickinson pass secrets, there remains little separation between a body and its landscape. Evolution engenders an exquisite bewilderment that becomes its own wilderness. Fantasy and wisdom disorientate in order to locate our 'percentage of beauty' in this intriguingly stunning collection."

Claudia Rankine, author of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*

"Like: throatsong that transcends by guts, gutting; a bone with a little gristle attached and some feather; where did that feather come from?; where does that meat come from; a green field with new-dug holes in spring time, springing time; Hero makes the language taste like something; 'what doesn't fear my hands?'"

Jen Tynes, co-editor of horse less press

"*afterpastures* is original. In art, there is no higher praise. In these poems, the pastoral is made to turn somersaults. Instead of bucolic calm married to mild satire in the irreal world of shepherd and shepherdess, here the scene is the knife in the hand poised to meet the beating heart. The knife is our knife, the hand, our hand. And the animal? It's our best self—but now in the grip of destruction. These strange, moving, passionate, and crystalline poems form a fable where the animal world, under our mesmerized gaze, becomes the mirror it always was."

Mary Jo Bang, author of *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon*

afterpastures was the winning manuscript in the 2007 Caketrain Chapbook Competition, as judged by Claudia Rankine.

CAKETRAIN
Box 82588, Pittsburgh, PA 15218
Contact: caketrainjournal@hotmail.com / www.caketrain.org
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